

# House Armed Services Committee

## DEMOCRATS

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Ike Skelton, Ranking Member

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## **Democrats Look to Preserve Army by Improving Training for Iraqi Security Services**

***WASHINGTON, DC – Today the House Armed Services Committee held a hearing on current efforts to train Iraqi Security Forces. Democrats raised concerns that the Army is showing signs of increased strain, and unless the pace of training Iraqi Security Forces is increased, we risk causing more serious damage to our Armed Forces.***

**Ranking Member Ike Skelton (MO)** made the following statement:

“As a starting point for today’s hearing, it goes without saying that every member of this committee wants America to succeed in Iraq. The stakes for the United States, for our own national security, for stability in the region, and for our military are extraordinarily high, and we simply must succeed.

It is also beyond question that all of us support our troops and want them to have the best training, equipment, and whatever else they need to succeed on the battlefield. Congress’ action in approving supplemental appropriations for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan speaks to our commitment in support of our troops.

But, Mr. Secretary, I have to tell you that as much as we want to succeed in Iraq, and as much as we support our troops, I am deeply troubled by the trend in recent events in Iraq. We’re told that we’re making significant progress in the training of Iraqi security forces. But, as has been reported in the open press, we only have three Iraqi security battalions that are fully capable of operating independently in a combat environment. We have an awfully long way to go before we have a sufficient number of fully trained Iraqi security forces and police that they can provide security for their country on a self-sustaining basis.

***It’s not about increasing total numbers going through basic training at this point. It is about increasing the quality and competence of the individuals and capability of the units so they feel confident they can provide for their own security.***

Embedding transition training teams with Iraqi units was a smart decision, but I question whether we have enough of these teams and whether they are moving fast enough. We may need to shift more of our forces from other tasks, and urge our NATO and Arab partners to help in any and every capacity they can. It is certainly not prudent to withdraw American forces until the Iraqis get to the point where they are capable of meeting the challenges before them.

What is particularly troubling to me is that despite the claims of progress in the training of Iraqi forces, you only have to read the paper to know the number of attacks against our forces and against Iraqis is increasing. If we have more trained Iraqi troops, and if the insurgency is in its “last throes” as Vice President Cheney has said, why aren’t the number and lethality of attacks decreasing? It is hard to understand how we are winning in the face of those facts. What other measure matters more than security?

We need answers to the questions of what is happening on the ground with Iraqi security forces. And, though it gives me no pleasure to say it, you need to make more progress and soon. If not, one of two things is going to happen—you are going to lose the American people or you are going to break the Army.

While the Army has been under the strain of sustained operational tempo for a long time, I worry we are on the verge of reaching its breaking point. The Army has not made its recruiting goal for the last four consecutive months, and we are approaching the point where the shortfall in recruits will equal the strength of an Army division. I am equally troubled that the Army has dropped its quality standards—accepting more recruits without high school diplomas or in lower mental categories, keeping problematic soldiers on active duty when they might have been separated in the past, and relaxing officer commissioning standards. These are measures of last resort and their implementation now sends a clear signal the Army is in deep trouble.

Army retention is currently exceeding goals, but that is not stopping the widespread use of “stop loss” authorities. Preventing service members from leaving active duty by using “stop loss” authority may be a stop gap measure, but something needs to be done now to address the looming crisis in the Army. Some soldiers are on their third rotation to Iraq, and Army divorces are skyrocketing. If something is not done to balance rotations into theater, retention will suffer. I do not believe that throwing money at the problem is the solution, and the substantial reenlistment bonuses we have authorized will only go so far. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses how they plan to keep the

Army from breaking under the strain of sustained high operational tempo. This is not just an Army problem now, this is a national problem.

Mr. Chairman, the bottom line is we're in a race against time. With public support for the war in Iraq declining, we have to show the American people tangible progress in the training of Iraq's security forces. The American people are smart. They know that before we can bring our troops home, the Iraqis have to be able to provide security for their country. What's causing distress is that the American people can't see that we're making enough progress in the only metric that really matters, and the casualty figures keep mounting.

But beyond training Iraqi security forces, our own forces can only take so much strain before they break. We must never get to that point. What's missing and what I hope to hear from our witnesses today is, what's our strategy for winning in Iraq while simultaneously beating the race against time. What can we tell people back home when they ask—what is being done to ensure that our Guardsmen and Reservists come home as soon as possible? It's not enough to just say we're going to increase the number of Iraqi forces, hope that the Iraqis can write a constitution and hold elections, provide more armor and counter IED technology to our troops, and gradually draw down our forces as circumstances permit. We and the American people need more assurances than we have had that you are making progress in Iraq. We need more details in the strategy for success because the facts out of Iraq seem to be at odds with the message of optimism.

Mr. Chairman, we're close to a tipping point in Iraq. I hope our witnesses will share their thoughts and provide us with the assurance that we need that the balance will tip in favor of a stable and free Iraq with a viable government that can survive over time. That is what we all want to achieve.

Thank you."

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